

Franklin, Benjamin

In his many careers as printer, moralist, essayist, civic leader, scientist, inventor, statesman, diplomat, and philosopher, Benjamin Franklin became for later generations of Americans both a spokesman and a model for the national character.

He was born in Boston on Jan. 17, 1706, into a pious Puritan household (see PURITANISM). His father, Josiah, was a candlemaker and a skillful mechanic, but Benjamin said that his father's "great Excellence lay in a sound understanding, and solid Judgment." He described his mother, originally named Abiah Folger and born on the island of Nantucket, as "a discreet and virtuous Woman." His parents raised a family of 13 children. In honoring them and in a lifelong affection for New England ways, Franklin demonstrated the lasting impact of his Puritan heritage.

The Bookman

After less than two years of formal schooling, Franklin was pressed into his father's trade, but his more profound talents proved to be intellectual. He devoured books by John Bunyan, Plutarch, Daniel Defoe, and Cotton Mather at home, and, after being apprenticed to his brother James, printer of The New England Courant, he read virtually every book that came to the shop. He generally absorbed the values and philosophy of the English Enlightenment. Like his favorite author, Joseph ADDISON, whose essays in the Spectator he virtually memorized, Franklin added the good sense, tolerance, and urbanity of the neoclassic age to his family's Puritan earnestness. He rejected his father's Calvinist theology, however, and soon espoused what became a lifelong belief in rational Christianity.

At the age of 16, Franklin wrote some pieces for the Courant signed "Silence Dogood," in which he satirized the Boston authorities and society. In one essay he argued that "hypocritical Pretenders to Religion" more injured the commonwealth than those "openly Profane." At one point James Franklin was imprisoned for similar statements, and Benjamin carried on the paper himself. Having thus learned to resist oppression, Benjamin refused to suffer his brother's own domineering qualities and in 1723 ran away to Philadelphia.

Though penniless and unknown, Franklin soon found a job as a printer. After a year he went to England, where he became a master printer, sowed some wild oats, astonished Londoners with his swimming feats, and lived among the aspiring writers of London. Returning to Philadelphia in 1726, he soon owned his own newspaper, the Pennsylvania Gazette, and began to print Poor Richard's Almanack (1732). His business expanded further when he contracted to do the public printing of the province, and established partnerships with printers in other colonies. He also operated a book shop and became clerk of the Pennsylvania Assembly and postmaster of Philadelphia. In 1748, Franklin, aged 42, retired to live comfortably off the income from his business, managed by others, for 20 years.

In the sayings of "Poor Richard" like "Early to bed and early to rise make a man healthy, wealthy, and wise" and in his scheme for moral virtue later set out in his famous Autobiography, Franklin summarized his view of how the poor man may improve himself by hard work, thrift, and honesty. Poor Richard's Almanack sold widely in North America, and a summarized version known as The Way to Wealth was translated into many languages.

The Civic Leader and Scientist

In 1727, Franklin began his career as a civic leader by organizing a club of aspiring tradesmen called the Junto, which met each week for discussion and planning. They aspired to build their own businesses, insure the growth of Philadelphia, and improve the quality of its life. Franklin thus led the Junto in founding a library (1731), a fire company (1736), a learned society (1743), a college (later the University of Pennsylvania, 1749), and an insurance company and a hospital (1751). The group also carried out plans for paving, cleaning, and lighting the streets and for making them safe by organizing an efficient nightwatch. They even formed a voluntary militia.

Franklin began yet another career when in 1740 he invented the Pennsylvania fireplace, later called the Franklin stove, which soon heated buildings all over Europe and North America. He also read treatises on electricity and began a series of experiments with his friends in Philadelphia. Experiments he proposed, first tried in France in 1752, showed that LIGHTNING was in fact a form of ELECTRICITY. Later that year his famous kite experiment, in which he flew a kite with the wire attached to a key during a thunderstorm, further established that laboratory-produced static electricity was akin to a previously mysterious and terrifying natural phenomenon. When the Royal Society in London published these discoveries, and the lightning rods he soon invented appeared on

buildings all over America and Europe, Franklin became world famous. He was elected to the Royal Society in 1756 and to the French Academy of Sciences in 1772. His later achievements included formulating a theory of heat absorption, measuring the Gulf Stream, designing ships, tracking storm paths, and inventing bifocal lenses.

The Politician and Provincial Agent

In 1751, Franklin was elected to the Pennsylvania Assembly, thus beginning nearly 40 years as a public official. He intended at first merely to enlist political support for his various civic enterprises, but partisan politics soon engulfed him. He opposed the Proprietary party that sought to preserve the power of the Penn family in Pennsylvania affairs, and as the legislative strategist and penman for the so-called Quaker party, he defended the powers of the elected representatives of the people. Franklin thus knew the virtues of self-government a generation before the Declaration of Independence.

Franklin did not at first, however, contemplate separation from Britain, which he regarded as having the freest, best government in the world. In the Plan of Union, which he presented (1754) to the ALBANY CONGRESS, he proposed partial self-government for the American colonies. A year later Franklin supported the ill-fated expedition of Gen. Edward BRADDOCK to recapture Fort Duquesne, and he persuaded the Quaker-dominated Pennsylvania Assembly to pass the colony's first militia law. He himself led a military expedition to the Lehigh Valley, where he established forts to protect frontiersmen from French and Indian raiders. As Franklin helped the empire fight for its life, however, he saw that colonial and ministerial ideas of governing the colonies were far apart. When he went to England in 1757 as agent of the Pennsylvania Assembly, he was alarmed to hear Lord Granville, president of the Privy Council, declare that for the colonies, the king's instructions were "the Law of the Land: for the King is the Legislator of the Colonies."

In England from 1757 to 1762, Franklin worked to persuade British officials to limit proprietary power in Pennsylvania. He also immensely enjoyed English social and intellectual life. He attended meetings of the Royal Society, visited David Hume in Scotland, heard great orchestras play the works of Handel, made grand tours of the continent, and received honorary doctor's degrees from the universities of St. Andrews (1759) and Oxford (1762).

He created a pleasant family-style life at his Craven Street boarding house in London, and began a long friendship and scientific-humorous correspondence with his landlady's daughter, Mary Stevenson. Their letters reveal his gifts for lively friendship, for brilliant letter writing, and for humane understanding.

At home from 1762 to 1764, Franklin traveled throughout the colonies, reorganizing the American postal system. He also built a new house on Market Street in Philadelphia—now reconstructed and open to visitors—and otherwise provided for his family, which included the former Deborah Read, his wife since 1730; their daughter Sally, who married Richard Bache and had a large family of her own; and his illegitimate son, William. Though he was appointed governor of New Jersey in 1762, William became a Loyalist during the American Revolution, completely estranged from his father.

As an influential politician, Franklin opposed the bloody revenges of frontier people against innocent Indians after PONTIAC'S REBELLION (1763) and helped to defend Philadelphia when the angry pioneers threatened its peace. In 1764 he lost his seat in the assembly in an especially scurrilous campaign. However, his party sent him to England in 1764 to petition that Pennsylvania be taken over as a royal colony.

The Defender of American Rights

The crisis precipitated by the STAMP ACT (1765) pushed that effort into the background and propelled Franklin into a new role as chief defender of American rights in Britain. At first he advised obedience to the act until it could be repealed, but news of violent protest against it in America stiffened his own opposition. After repeal of the Stamp Act, Franklin reaffirmed his love for the British Empire and his desire to see the union of mother country and colonies "secured and established," but he also warned that "the seeds of liberty are universally found and nothing can eradicate them." He opposed the TOWNSHEND ACTS (1767) because such "acts of oppression" would "sour American tempers" and perhaps even "hasten their final revolt." When the British Parliament passed the Tea Act (1773), which hurt the colonial merchants, Franklin protested in a series of finely honed political essays, including "An Edict by the King of Prussia" and "Rules by Which a Great Empire May Be Reduced to a Small One." As these satires circulated in England, Franklin wrote his sister: "I have held up a Looking-Glass in which some of the Ministers may see their ugly faces, and the Nation its Injustice."

In 1773, Franklin's friends in Massachusetts, against his instructions, published letters by Gov. Thomas

HUTCHINSON that Franklin had obtained in confidence. Apparently exposed as a dishonest schemer, Franklin was denounced before the Privy Council in January 1774 and stripped of his postmaster general's office. Although he continued to work for conciliation, the Boston Tea Party and Britain's oppressive response to it soon doomed such efforts. In March 1775, Franklin sailed for home, sure "the extream corruption . . . in this old rotten State" would ensure "more Mischief than Benefit from a closer Union" between Britain and its colonies.

From April 1775 to October 1776, Franklin served on the Pennsylvania Committee of Safety and in the Continental Congress, submitted articles of confederation for the united colonies, proposed a new constitution for Pennsylvania, and helped draft the Declaration of Independence. He readily signed the declaration, thus becoming a revolutionist at the age of 70.

The Diplomat

In October 1776, Franklin and his two grandsons sailed for France, where he achieved an amazing personal triumph and gained critical French aid for the Revolutionary War. Parisian literary and scientific circles hailed him as a living embodiment of Enlightenment virtues. Wigless and dressed in plain brown clothes, he was called le Bonhomme Richard. Franklin was at his best creating the legend of his life among the ladies of Paris, writing witty letters, printing bagatelles, and telling anecdotes.

He moved slowly at first in his diplomacy. France wanted to injure Britain but could not afford to help the American rebels unless eventual success seemed assured. Franklin thus worked behind the scenes to send war supplies across the Atlantic, thwart British diplomacy, and make friends with influential French officials. He overcame his own doubts about the possibly dishonest dealings of his fellow commissioner Silas DEANE in channeling war materials to American armies, but the third commissioner, Arthur Lee (1740-92), bitterly condemned both Deane and Franklin. Despite these quarrels, in February 1778, following news of the American victory at Saratoga, the three commissioners were able to sign the vital French alliance.

Franklin then became the first American minister to France. For seven years he acted as diplomat, purchasing agent, recruiting officer, loan negotiator, admiralty court, and intelligence chief and was generally the main representative of the new United States in Europe. Though nearly 80 years old, he oversaw the dispatch of French armies and navies to North America, supplied American armies with French munitions, outfitted John Paul JONES—whose famous ship the Bonhomme Richard was named in Franklin's honor—and secured a succession of loans from the nearly bankrupt French treasury.

After the loss at Yorktown (1781) finally persuaded British leaders that they could not win the war, Franklin made secret contact with peace negotiators sent from London. In these delicate negotiations he proposed treaty articles close to those finally agreed to: complete American independence, access to the Newfoundland fishing grounds, evacuation of British forces from all occupied areas, and a western boundary on the Mississippi. Together with John JAY, Franklin represented the United States in signing the Treaty of Paris (Sept. 3, 1783), by which the world's foremost military power recognized the independence of the new nation.

Franklin traveled home in 1785. Though in his 80th year and suffering from painful bladder stones, he nonetheless accepted election for three years as president of Pennsylvania and resumed active roles in the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, the American Philosophical Society, and the University of Pennsylvania. At the CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION of 1787, although he was too weak to stand, Franklin's good humor and gift for compromise often helped to prevent bitter disputes.

Franklin's final public pronouncements urged ratification of the Constitution and approved the inauguration of the new federal government under his admired friend George Washington. He wrote friends in France that "we are making Experiments in Politicks," but that American "affairs mend daily and are getting into good order very fast." Thus, cheerful and optimistic as always, Benjamin Franklin died in Philadelphia on Apr. 17, 1790.

Ralph Ketcham

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The Administration of Benjamin Franklin

After serving as Philadelphia's postmaster from 1737, Benjamin Franklin was appointed deputy postmaster general for America in 1753. Franklin made many fundamental improvements in the colonial postal services. He conducted periodic inspection tours, made new surveys, and mapped shorter routes for faster deliveries between stations. He introduced the use of stagecoaches as mail carriers, milestoned main routes, scheduled runs by night between Philadelphia and New York, and arranged more frequent and faster services between Philadelphia, New York, and Boston. In 1755, a packet service was launched from England to New York and another from Falmouth to Charleston, providing the southern colonies with their first direct postal connection with London. By the time he was discharged from office in 1774, Franklin had established post roads from Maine to Florida and from New York to Canada, where in 1763 he had set up postal services at Quebec, Trois-Rivieres, and Montreal; and mail between North America and England was being delivered on a regular schedule.

On July 26, 1775, Benjamin Franklin was appointed postmaster general by the Continental Congress. He served in this capacity until Nov. 7, 1776, when his talents were needed elsewhere.

The U.S. Postal System

The Constitution of 1789 mandated the establishment of post offices and post roads. Congress made the U.S. Post Office an organ of the federal government, and the first postmaster general, Samuel Osgood of Massachusetts, was appointed by President George Washington in 1789. When Osgood took office, the 13 states had only about 75 post offices and 3,900 km (2,400 mi) of post roads. Within a decade both numbers had quintupled, as had postal revenues.

As lands to the south and west were settled, interior postal communications became costly and difficult to maintain. Settlers frequently petitioned Congress for new mail service, and the growing political importance of the posts became apparent when Andrew Jackson made (1829) the postmaster general a member of the cabinet. Postmasterships and related positions became patronage positions and were parceled out to loyal party followers.

Rates of postage—except for newspapers—had always been high. Postage for a single-sheet letter sent more than 650 km (400 mi), for example, was 25 cents (1816-45). Letter carriers earned no salaries but were paid 2 cents by the recipients for each letter they delivered. In the populous East, private letter companies began challenging the federal postal monopoly in the 1830s and '40s by providing low-cost service within and between cities.

Rowland Hill's Postal Reforms

The English educator Rowland Hill published his recommendations for post office reform in 1837. Among his innovative ideas were the ending of postage charges based on the distance letters traveled, the establishment of a uniform postage rate, and the prepayment of postage through the sale of adhesive-backed stamps sold at post offices (see PHILATELY). Hill's recommendation for the basic letter rate was one penny for each half-ounce (the average charge for letters was sixpence). Hill's reforms were adopted in England in 1840. The U.S. Congress authorized the use of adhesive postage stamps in 1847 and gradually adopted other Hill-authored reforms.

The Growth of the Postal System

The reduction of postal rates in the United States (by 1863, letter rates had shrunk to 3 cents per half-ounce) and the gradual broadening of service allowed the federal postal monopoly to grow, and by the time of the Civil War, most private posts were closed. The California Gold Rush (1849) precipitated an immediate need for transcontinental mails. Steamships provided service by way of Panama; improved overland coach routes reduced transcontinental transit to 20 days. The Pony Express (1860-61)—a private venture—offered 10- to 6-day horse courier service between Saint Joseph and San Francisco. The transcontinental railroad (1869) provided 7-day mails between New York and San Francisco.

Established in 1863, the Railway Mail Service remained the most valued postal innovation until shortly after World War II. Day and night mails were sorted, picked up, and dropped off by clerks in special postal cars while trains sped between thousands of towns, greatly reducing sorting work in large post offices. By 1889 special trains moved transcontinental mails in 109 hours.

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postal services

A postal service is responsible for the collection and distribution of the mail. It is financed largely through the sale of postage stamps to those who use its services and by various other fees. In almost every country the postal service is operated, and often subsidized, by the government. In the United States, however, the U.S. Postal Service, which was established under the Postal Reorganization Act of 1970, is an independent, nonprofit corporation.

ORIGINS

In the ancient world the establishment of governments that ruled over widespread areas and the development of trade necessitated the setting up of message-carrying systems. As early as the 2d millennium BC in Egypt and the 1st millennium in China, relay systems were developed using messengers on horseback and relay stations situated on major roads. These systems were at first reserved for government correspondence, but commercial interests were soon allowed to participate and, in time, so was the private sector.

The Persian Model

The Persians inaugurated a postal service under Cyrus the Great (d. 529 BC) that still ranks as a major achievement. The Greek historian Herodotus enumerated 111 relay stations for mounted couriers on the Sardis-Susa road alone, a route of about 2,575 km (1,600 mi). The Romans patterned their postal organization on the Persian model. They created an extensive highway system to facilitate troop movements, travel, trade, and communications. Papyrus, parchment, and wax tablets were used for correspondence. Postal relay stations were large and numerous. Although government posts carried only official letters, commercial posting companies served merchants and other citizens. Fifty to 80 km (30 to 50 mi) per day were covered by the average daily post, and 160 km (100 mi) per day by occasional express riders. After Rome's central authority collapsed, however, reliable posts in western Europe virtually disappeared.

Renaissance Postal Systems

The introduction of paper just prior to the advent of the Renaissance in western Europe sparked a boom in official, commercial, ecclesiastical, and private correspondence. This sharp increase made it necessary for monarchical authorities to rehabilitate and extend the postal systems originally set up by the Romans.

The University of Paris established one of the first postal services in western Europe. Under the protection of the crown, from the 13th century until the end of the 18th, the service carried letters and money between students at the university and parents throughout France. In 1477 the French king Louis XI established a nationwide network of relay stations serviced by mounted couriers. England opened a similar service in 1481, and many of the Italian and German city-states followed suit. These government services operated in addition to private services. Among the oldest of the private systems was that begun in 1450 by the Thurn and Taxis families of Venice for the Holy Roman Empire; it was, in effect, a franchise financed by an annual fee. By the 19th century, however, the practice of granting royal franchises had been discontinued in favor of royal monopolies whose revenues went directly to the crown.

DEVELOPMENTS IN NORTH AMERICA

Early colonial mail service was irregular, haphazard, and for the most part in private hands. For a fee of one penny, colonists in seaport towns could post letters to relatives abroad with the captains of merchant ships. Incoming mail from Europe was left at seaport taverns and coffeehouses for pickup. Civil administration and military letters and documents were entrusted to the captains of naval vessels.

The first attempt to regulate foreign mail was made in 1639, when the General Court of Massachusetts enacted an ordinance designating Richard Fairbanks's tavern in Boston as the official repository for overseas mail. Similar enactments were made in Virginia (1657) and New Amsterdam (1660). The governor of New York at that time, Francis Lovelace, established an overland postal service between New York and Boston in 1672. It was the first intercity service in colonial America, and similar services soon opened in the Connecticut and Pennsylvania regions.

Rapid increases in population and in commercial activity generated an increasing demand for postal services. In 1693 mounted courier service was instituted between Portsmouth, N.H., and Philadelphia. Posts were extended to Annapolis, Md. (1727), Williamsburg, Va. (1732), and Montreal and Quebec (both in 1763).

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Intermediate Postal Systems

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POSTAL SERVICE IN NORTH AMERICA

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service facilitated extensions of rural routes, which by 1920 numbered 43,445. Largely in response to farmers' demands, a national parcel-post service was begun in 1913.

Canceling machines (1876), mechanical sorting devices (1907 and 1915), and underground pneumatic tubes (1893-1953) were introduced in various U.S. cities to speed mail distribution. Airmail was first tried in 1911. By 1924 the New York-San Francisco air route was regularly flown in 34 hours (westbound). After World War II the rapid expansion of airmail service and the reduction of railway mail service drastically changed mail transportation in the United States.

New postal facilities serving an urbanized American society without railroads proved extremely costly. With virtually no mail sorted in transit, burdens in fixed post offices mounted. ZIP codes (introduced 1963) became adjuncts to key-punch sorting machines and automatic address-reading machines. Package-handling machines (1959) and conveyor systems (c.1907) were greatly improved in the 1960s. A fully automated post office opened at Providence, R.I., in 1960, heralding the new look of the mechanized postal system.

Postal Reorganization Act of 1970

On Aug. 12, 1970, President Richard M. Nixon signed into law the Postal Reorganization Act of 1970, which changed the federal Post Office Department into the U.S. Postal Service, an independent agency within the executive branch. Its purpose was to enhance the self-financing potentialities of the postal service, to increase its efficiency, to reduce the public tax burden, and to remove the service from political control. The service often operated at a deficit, however. There were some years in the early 1980s that had surpluses, but later in the decade, despite postage rate hikes in 1985 and 1988, there were deficits. Labor costs accounted for about 85% of the service's operating budget. Suggestions for easing the financial crisis included "privatizing" the USPS. (Private carriers already have taken over many delivery routes, and private parcel delivery is widespread.) By 1988, faced with finding ways to help cut the overall federal deficit, the USPS cut back on some services. In 1989 the government returned the USPS to the off-budget status it had enjoyed prior to 1985, a move that would insulate the service from further deficit-reduction efforts. Nonetheless, in 1990 the USPS sought another rate increase.

NEW POSTAL SERVICE TECHNOLOGY

Recognizing that the utilization of electronic automation could help contain rising costs while helping to meet increasing public demands for faster delivery services at reasonable rates, the U.S. Postal Service is conducting feasibility studies on available technologies. To pave the way for such improvements, it developed the "ZIP + 4," the nine-digit code system that began with congressional authorization, in October 1983. By the late 1980s only about 15% of mailings used the nine-digit code, and the USPS was criticized for promoting the code before having the equipment to process such mail.

Carl Scheele

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